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SUBJECT: THAILAND'S WEEK IN POLITICS, MARCH 13-18, 2005

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THAKSIN RANK ORDERS HIS DEPUTY PRIME MINISTERS

1. (SBU) Prime Minister Thaksin has announced the ranking of his six deputy prime ministers and delineated their individual oversight authorities. The Public Administration Act allows the Prime Minister to delegate to the deputy prime ministers, including designating the order in which they are authorized to act on his behalf in his absence from the country. The deputy prime ministers are ranked as follows:

Deputy Prime Minister (and Finance Minister) Somkid Jatusripitak - In addition to being first among equals in acting on Thaksin's behalf in the event of the Prime Minister's absence from Thailand, Somkid is tasked with overseeing the Finance Ministry, Tourism and Sports Ministry, Commerce Ministry, Industry Ministry, the Budget Bureau, and the National Economic and Social Development Board. In the event that Thaksin died in office, Somkid would become acting PM in the short period before Parliament would be expected to officially chose a new prime minister.

Deputy Prime Minister (and Interior Minister) Pol. Gen. Chidchai Vanasatidya, although a newcomer to the Cabinet, is second in line to act for Thaksin. His oversight duties include the Defense Ministry, Interior Ministry, Justice Ministry, the National Security Council, the National Security Agency, and the Royal Thai Police. He will also reportedly act as the ex-officio Chairman of the National Security Council, the National Policy Commission, the Police Commission, the Narcotics Control Board and the Anti-Money Laundering Commission.

Deputy Prime Minister Chaturon Chaisang, third in line, is overseeing the Information and Communications Technology Ministry, the Education Ministry and the National Buddhist Bureau.

Deputy Prime Minister Surakiart Sathirathai, the former Foreign Minister, will be fourth in line to act for Prime Minister Thaksin. His oversight responsibilities include the Foreign Affairs Ministry, Social development and Human Security Ministry and the Labor Ministry.

Deputy Prime Minister Pinij Jarusombat, fifth in line, is overseeing the Agriculture and Cooperatives Ministry, the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry, the Public Health Ministry, the Consumer Protection Board, and the National Village and Urban Community Fund.

Wissanu Krea-Ngam, sixth in line, oversees the Transport Ministry, the Energy ministry, the Prime Minister's Office, the Council of State, the Civil Service Commission, the National Economic and Social Advisory Board, and the Office of the Civil Service Development Commission.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTERS ALSO TASKED TO OVERSEE COUNTRY'S ADMINISTRATIVE ZONES

2. (SBU) Govt Spokesman Pol. Gen. Chaloeudet Chomphunut disclosed after the cabinet meeting on March 15 that PM Thaksin has also tasked the deputy prime ministers, and one minister, to oversee the "overall administration" in Thailand's 76 provinces. To facilitate this goal, the Thaksin team reportedly divided the country into 19 administrative zones, excluding Bangkok, and doled out to each deputy PM at least 3 zones for their oversight. However, this new system is not as significant a change as it might appear. For example, the deputy prime ministers' new provincial "oversight" responsibilities do not give them direct authority over the governors or other Thai provincial authorities. Deputy prime ministers must still go through the Interior Minister Pol. Gen. Chidchai Vanasatidya, who is also a deputy prime minister, to suggest changes to be implemented by the governors. The new responsibility appears to amount to each deputy prime minister having a special brief to keep on top of developments in certain provinces and advise PM Thaksin. The allocation of zones is as follows:

Deputy Prime Minister Somkid Jatusripitak:

Zone 1 (Chiang Rai / Chiang Mai / Nan / Phayao / Phrae / Mae Hong Son / Lampang / Lamphun)
Zone 9 (Chanthaburi / Chon Buri / Trat / Rayong)
Zone 17 (Krabi / Phang-nga / Phuket)

Deputy Prime Minister Pol. Gen. Chidchai Vanasatidya:

Zone 14 (Yasothon / Si Sa Ket / Amnat Charoen / Ubon Ratchathani)
Zone 18 (Narathiwat / Pattani / Yala)
Zone 19 (Songkhla / Satun)

Deputy Prime Minister Chaturon Chaisang:

Zone 6 (Kanchanaburi / Nakhon Pathom / Ratchaburi / Suphan Buri)
Zone 8 (Chachoengsao / Nakhon Nayok / Prachin Buri / Samut Prakan / Sa Kaeo)
Zone 11 (Kalasin / Nakhon Phanom / Mukdahan / Sakon Nakhon)

Deputy Prime Minister Surakiart Sathirathai:

Zone 2 (Tak, Phitsanulok / Phetchabun / Sukhothai / Uttaradit)
Zone 3 (Kamphaeng Phet / Nakhon Sawan / Phichit / Uthai Thani)
Zone 16 (Trang, Nakhon Si Thammarat / Phattalung)

Deputy Prime Minister Pini Jarusombat:

Zone 10 (Nong Khai / Nong Bua Lam Phu / Loei / Udon Thani)
Zone 12 (Khon Kaen / Maha Sarakham / Roi Et)
Zone 13 (Chaiyaphum / Nakhon Ratchasima / Buriram / Surin)
Zone 15 (Chumphon / Ranong / Surat Thani)

Deputy Prime Minister Wissanu Krea-ngam:

Zone 4 (Nonthaburi / Pathum Thani / Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya / Angthong)
Zone 5 (Chainat / Lop Buri / Saraburi / Sing Buri)
Zone 7 (Prachuap Khirikhan / Petchaburi / Samut Songkhram / Samut Sakhon)

Prime Minister's Office Minister Suranand Vejjajiva has been given oversight of the administration of Bangkok.

SPARKS FLY IN FIRST PARLIAMENT BUSINESS SESSION

13. (SBU) Opposition Democrat Party (DP) MPs walked out of Parliament on February 16 during its first business session after Speaker Bhokin Bhalakula ejected one of their fellow members following an altercation over voting procedure. According to reports, Democrat MP Rangsim Rodrasamee accused Thai Rak Thai (TRT) MP Phayap Panket of voting more than once, using an absent TRT MP's electronic voting card. Phayap demanded an apology from Rangsim. Rangsim refused. After exchanges between government and opposition MPs, Bhokin told Rangsim to withdraw her accusation or leave the chamber. Rangsim chose to depart, sparking a walkout by her DP colleagues. The vote that started the bitter recriminations was over a disagreement between TRT and DP MPs over what time to start the next meeting of the lower chamber. In addition to criticism from DP lawmakers for ejecting Rangsim, Bhokin has also reportedly been criticized by members of the Wang Nam Yen faction of the TRT Party, who accused the Speaker of mishandling the whole situation. Former Deputy House Speaker and Chart Thai Party MP Somsak Prisananathakun characterized Bhokin's chairmanship as a "rubber stamp."

14. (SBU) Comment: Feelings were already raw among DP MPs over what they consider the Speaker's blatant lack of neutrality. Bhokin was previously Thaksin's Interior Minister and took the untraditional step of voting for Thaksin last week when he was formally elected Prime Minister (see Bangkok 1739). By his abrupt decision to eject Rangsim from the Parliament chamber he has shown a lack of political finesse by ignoring the expectation that the Speaker will strive to appear objective and non-partisan. TRT subsequently admitted that several MPs had engaged in covering up for absent colleagues by using their electronic cards to vote.

REPORTS OF RUMBLINGS IN MAJOR TRT FACTION OVER SPOILS

15. (SBU) Members of the Wang Nam Yen (WNY) faction of influential politician Sanoh Thienthong are grumbling over what they consider a disproportional allocation of ministerial and assistant slots to Bangkok MPs rather than to the MPs from the other regions of the country, especially the Northeast, their bailiwick, which brought in a massive TRT seat tally. His faction members especially complained to Sanoh about the following appointments: former Health Minister and Thaksin's Bangkok campaign manager (and TRT faction leader in her own right) Sudarat Keyuraphan as Agriculture Minister; Suranand Vejjajiva as Prime Minister's Office Minister; Phumtham Wechayachai as Deputy

Communications Minister; Pimon Sriwikorn as Deputy Secretary General to Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Chidchai; and Pitipong Temjareon as Secretary to the Foreign Minister. The WNY MPs are also unhappy over the replacement of Sanoh as party Chief Whip former Justice Minister Pongthep Thianthong, who they view as more junior and less capable. Sanoh reportedly told his followers to be patient and see what develops over the coming months.

16. (SBU) Comment: Sanoh has been battling to maintain his position vis-a-vis other TRT factions over the past three years, particularly with the rise in influence of the Wang Babuan faction headed by Thaksin's sister Yaowapa Wongsawat. He has also seen his star eclipsed by the very low rankings that his faction members received on the TRT party list compared to those given members of rival factions. His private secretary and confidant Burin Hiranburans, for example was ranked no 95 on the list compared to the number 52 ranking he held in the 2001 election. In another case, close aide Boonthueng Panpanit was ranked 88th this time around, compared to 56th in the previous election. Sanoh's followers don't need much more evidence to sense that their leader's influence within the TRT is on the wane.

CHUWIT COMES UP WITH HIS OWN COLOR ZONES - FOR THAKSIN'S NEW CABINET MEMBERS

17. (SBU) In an obvious spoof of Thaksin's use of color codes to denote the level of security in Thailand's southern provinces' districts (ref. C), outspoken Chart Thai Party List (Bangkok) MP Chuwit Kamolwisit, announced on March 16 his idea of categorizing the Prime Minister's new cabinet ministers by color. Chuwit straight-faced declared that under his plan, he would divide all new ministers into 3 colored groups; "Green" for those with acceptable qualifications, "Yellow" for those with doubtful qualifications, and "Red" for those with unacceptable qualifications. According to Chuwit, ministers in "Yellow" and "Red" groups must be kept under close watch. He identified 9 of Thaksin's new Ministers who in his view qualify for the "Red" group.

Chuwit's "Red" list

Pini Jarusombat (Deputy PM)
Wissanu Krea-Ngam (Deputy PM)
Sudarat Keyuraphun (Minister of Agriculture & Cooperatives)
Suriya Jungrungruengkit (Minister of Transport)
Pracha Maleenont (Minister of Social Development and Human Security)
Somsak Thepsutin (Minister of Tourism and Sports)
Adisai Bodharamik (Minister of Education)
Watana Muangsook (Minister of Industry)
Newin Chidchob (Deputy Minister of Agriculture & Cooperatives)

18. (U) Chuwit added that there are 14 ministers in the "Green" group and 12 in the "Yellow" group. He reportedly intends to evaluate all the ministers every 6 months, and those with better or more satisfactory performance would be re-categorized into a better color group. (Note: Chuwit did not explain if those in the "Green" group would be degraded if their performance got worse. End note.)

19. (SBU) Comment: Chuwit, the "Massage Parlor Tycoon," gained immense public popularity in Bangkok when he threatened to reveal the names of police and other officials who had demanded bribes and other payoffs from his brothel operations over the years. Chuwit ran for governor last year and came in a strong third. He won a Chart Thai (CT) Party List seat in the February general elections. True to his independent image, Chuwit was the only MP to register a vote against Thaksin for Prime Minister in the Parliament after the other CT members (save CT Leader Barnharn Silpa-archa) and the opposition Democrat Party decided to abstain.

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